

9 Assessing intercultural learning in virtual exchange

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Abstract

Assessment of students' work in Virtual Exchange (VE) frequently focuses on their participation in the activities and may also include an evaluation of students' learning. In this chapter, we discuss a two-sided approach to assessing students' work in an intercultural VE project. On the one hand, we evaluated students' engagement in the exchange with the goal of formally assessing their work and assigning it a grade. On the other, we looked at students' intercultural competence development for research purposes. While we believe that it is beneficial to use a combination of assessment tools, reflective portfolios emerged as the most suitable way to assess students' participation, learning, and intercultural competence development in the VE.

Keywords: portfolio, reflection, culture learning, intercultural competence.

1. Introduction

VEs are one of the most convenient ways to enrich a Foreign Language (FL) classroom with authentic interactions with native speakers. There are many potential benefits to VEs, such as increased motivation (Lee, 2007; Vinagre, 2007), development of language skills (Belz & Kinginger, 2002; Chen & Yang, 2016; Liaw & English, 2013), and growth in intercultural competence

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(Jin, 2015; Lamy & Goodfellow, 2010; O'Dowd, 2007; Vinagre, 2016). The exchange discussed in this chapter was implemented with the goal of providing students with an opportunity to analyze their own and target cultures, as well as practice their intercultural communication skills. In the US class, this exchange also served as a site for a research study exploring, among other things, the development of intercultural competence. Given the twofold purpose of the exchange, there were two types of assessment. One was a part of students' grades in the course and focused on assessing their VE activities. The other one was a part of the research study and assessed the development of students' intercultural competence.

Assessment of students' activity in VE is frequently based on their participation (O'Dowd, 2010). In this approach, instructors set an expected number of posts, comments, or times students should contribute to a discussion and then count those instances for each student. While this approach is straightforward and may motivate students to do the work, it does not value the receptive part of the interactions (O'Dowd, 2010). In our experience, we found that some students do a lot of 'invisible' work in the exchange by reading and analyzing most of the conversations, while others complete the required posts with the least amount of effort (Izmaylova, 2017, 2022). Another type of assessment common in VE is self-assessment in the form of portfolios and reflections (Godwin-Jones, 2013; O'Dowd, 2010). Godwin-Jones (2013) posited that students' reflection on their intercultural communication experience is necessary for their understanding the significance of that experience and their learning. At the same time, some students may not be forthcoming in their reflections and others may lack life experience to be able to deeply reflect on their interactions. In our case, we combined the most commonly used assessment practices and evaluated students' work based on their participation and portfolios.

Evaluating intercultural competence is known to be a challenging endeavor (O'Dowd & Dooly, 2020) with little consensus among researchers on how it should be assessed and whether it should be assessed at all (Schulz, 2007; Sercu, 2004). Researchers agree that intercultural competence is too complex of a construct to evaluate through tests and standard types of assessment (Dervin,

2010; Schulz, 2007; Storme & Derakhshani, 2002), which is why alternative forms of assessment, such as surveys and portfolios are preferred (Byram, 1997; Dervin, 2010; Fantini, 2009). In addition, due to the complexity of the notion of intercultural competence, it is more feasible to focus on its specific components (e.g. openness to other cultures, skills of cultural comparison, etc.) instead of trying to evaluate it as a whole (Deardorff, 2009). For the purposes of the study, we first identified some commonalities among influential theories and conceptualizations of intercultural competence (Bennett, 1993; Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993) to identify the components to be assessed. In general terms, intercultural competence is viewed as an ability to mediate between cultures and to shift one's frame of reference, which requires an understanding of one's own culture and an ability to interpret foreign culture. Additionally, it may be important to understand what culture is in order to be able to analyze it. To assess these three constructs, we used a combination of pre- and post-exchange questionnaires, portfolios, and pre- and post-exchange interviews. The pre-exchange questionnaires and interviews aimed to understand students' backgrounds, expectations for the project, and their understanding of the concept of culture. Post-exchange questionnaires and interviews focused on students' experiences in the exchange, their overall learning, and intercultural competence development. The portfolios served a dual role – for students to reflect on their experience, and for us to formally assess their participation, as well as examine their intercultural learning.

2. Overview of the VE project

The two partners in this VE were two FL classes. On one side, there was a fourth semester Spanish class at a large US university. Fourth semester is the second course in the intermediate level sequence and is the last course required for all students to take. There were 19 students in the class. On the other side of the exchange was a third-semester English class at a higher education institution in Colombia. The Colombian students' levels of English was described by their instructor as approximately intermediate low to intermediate mid based on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)

scale. While there were approximately 40 Colombian students in the Facebook Group at the beginning of the exchange, only eight to ten students participated regularly. The goal of the exchange was for students in these two classes to practice intercultural communication in their native and in their respective target languages in an authentic context. In addition, students were expected to learn about their target cultures and practice explaining their own cultures to foreigners.

The project lasted eight weeks and was constructed as a many-to-many interaction in a private Facebook Group. Facebook was chosen as a medium for the exchange in order to make the interaction environment as authentic and similar to students' daily communication as possible. Each week students had to make one photo or video post in the group and write a caption for it. This original post was to be done in their native languages. Then students read posts made by their exchange partners and had to comment on at least two posts in the target language. In this manner, all conversations about the US culture were in English, while all conversations about the Colombian culture were in Spanish. Each week students had an assigned topic and guiding questions for their posts (see [supplementary materials](#) Appendix 1). In the US class, there was also a weekly in-class discussion about students' experience and learning in the exchange that week. These discussions were conducted in both Spanish and English to allow students an opportunity to express themselves however they wished. Students tended to begin the conversation in Spanish but switch to English once each discussion got more profound. At the end of the project, students wrote and turned in a portfolio of their experiences (see [supplementary materials](#) Appendix 2).

3. Assessment

There were two types of assessment in the exchange, one tied to the students' grades, and another one meant to assess the development of their intercultural competence for research purposes. While the first type is the most important one for the practitioners, the second one will also be explained to demonstrate the

possibilities of assessing students' intercultural learning. It is important to note that this chapter describes the assessment of the US students only.

3.1. Assessing students' activities in the exchange

Students' work in the VE was assessed using their posts in the Facebook Group and their end-of-project portfolios. Their grades were based on the rubric below (Table 1).

Table 1. VE assessment rubric (Izmaylova, 2017, p. 269)

Criteria	Score
Student enters the required number of posts and comments timely (posts by Friday and comments [on the previous week's posts] by Wednesday each week).	3 – 2 – 1
Posts are thoughtful and include meaningful information about your life and American culture.	4 – 3 – 2 – 1
Student engages in conversations, when appropriate: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • respond to your classmates or students from Colombia when they comment on your pictures; and • react to their responses to your questions. 	3 – 2 – 1
Posts/comments are written/spoken in full sentences and express clear information/ideas; errors do not interfere with the meaning of the messages.	3 – 2 – 1
Comments are free from significant grammatical errors. Student demonstrates: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • subject-verb and noun-adjective agreement; • correct verb conjugation; and • correct use of tense/aspect. 	3 – 2 – 1
Portfolio is complete and turned in on time.	4 – 3 – 2 – 1
Total	____ / 20

The rubric consisted of several criteria, each having a scale of points to represent full or partial fulfillment of the requirements. First, students had to submit the required number of posts and comments before the deadline each week. Their contributions were also evaluated on how thoughtful and

meaningful they were. The goal of this criterion was to have students think about the topic and guiding questions and produce a post that would help Colombian students learn something about US culture. The next criterion was whether students responded to comments that addressed them or their posts. In other words, students were expected to keep the interaction going and not disengage after completing their post and two comments. Finally, posts were holistically evaluated on their accuracy and comprehensibility. The last criterion for the grade was the completeness and timeliness of the portfolio, which will be discussed below.

At the beginning of the project, the instructor created a spreadsheet to keep track of each student's posts every week and to make notes on the quality of their content and language. However, as the semester went on this task proved to be rather overwhelming. While it was easy to find each student's original post, tracking their interactions in the comment sections was very time-consuming. In addition, the algorithms used by Facebook rely on the number and recency of interactions with each post instead of using a chronological order. This makes it easy to overlook the posts that received less attention. Additionally, it is harder to trace each student's contribution in a many-to-many interaction, which is why an exchange in pairs or small groups would have made this type of assessment more feasible. A different platform for the exchange or a different set up within the Facebook Group would likely have yielded a different result. Given how time-consuming and sometimes ineffective the rubric was, the instructor modified the rubric to only track the number of posts and comments made by the students each week, narrowing down this part of the assessment to pure participation.

In addition to their regular participation in the exchange, students created project portfolios, where they reflected on their experience and learning ([supplementary materials](#) Appendix 2). The portfolios served a dual purpose: they were used as part of summative assessment of students' work and as a research instrument to assess intercultural learning. Portfolios were briefly introduced in the beginning of the semester and discussed in more detail at the end of the VE. Students were instructed to include two to three interactions where they thought they

grew as intercultural communicators and describe why they were meaningful to them. As described in the guidelines, those were not necessarily to be the best or most successful interactions, but rather ones where students learned something important. Students were given examples of what types of interactions to include but were encouraged to write about other instances as well. To ensure their complete freedom of expression and a deeper reflection, students were given the choice to write either in English or in Spanish. All students opted to write in English. In addition, the portfolio itself was not graded, but was a part of the overall VE grade. To receive full credit, students had to make sure it was complete (i.e. have two to three examples with reflections) and turn it in on time. The course instructor provided written comments to the portfolios, but there was no formal feedback to students regarding their participation in the exchange beyond the weekly class discussions. In this sense, the portfolios did not inform students' learning during the exchange, but they offered an opportunity for students to process their learning. It also allowed the instructor to reflect on how students viewed their interactions and take that into account when implementing VE in other classes.

3.2. Assessing intercultural competence development

As mentioned above, this VE was also a site for a research study on intercultural competence development through VE. The researcher used several data sources to qualitatively assess the changes in students' understanding of culture as a concept, their understanding of their own culture, and their understanding of the target culture (see [supplementary materials](#) Appendix 3 for a summary of data sources and each instrument). Prior to the exchange, students completed a background questionnaire and a project expectations questionnaire. Students' answers then informed the researcher's questions in the semi-structured one-on-one interviews. Similarly, after the exchange, students completed a project experience questionnaire. The researcher used the information from those questionnaires and students' portfolios in the post-project interviews.

All the data from the questionnaires, transcribed interviews, and portfolios was coded following a general interpretive qualitative analysis method ([Merriam,](#)

2009; Saldaña, 2016). The researcher looked for instances that referred to the three identified components of intercultural competence and completed several rounds of coding and subcoding as is typical for the iterative nature of qualitative research. While the complete findings of the research study are beyond the scope of this chapter (see Izmaylova, 2017, for detailed methodology and results), it is important to note that the use of questionnaires, interviews, and portfolios was appropriate and effective in assessing the development of students' intercultural competence. Our analysis showed that students developed a more nuanced understanding of the concept of culture and began viewing culture learning in an FL classroom more favorably as a result of the exchange. They also demonstrated an increased awareness of practices and perspectives of their own culture and were able to take on a critical stance toward it by attempting to analyze it from an outsider's perspective. Finally, while learning about common practices and perspectives in Colombian culture, students started connecting various bits of information on separate topics to make general observations about the target culture, which shows that participants developed their skills of discovering and interpreting cultural knowledge.

4. Conclusions and lessons learned

This chapter described a VE where two types of assessment took place, one used to assess students' participation and work in the exchange and another one assessing the development of students' intercultural competence. Depending on their goals, practitioners may choose to focus on either one or both.

Regarding participation, we have found it difficult and time-consuming to track each student's posts and assess each one of them using a rubric. Simply tracking the number of posts seemed to be an easier way to make sure they fulfill the requirements of the exchange, if that is needed. Similar to other scholars (Caluianu, 2019; Godwin-Jones, 2013; O'Dowd, 2010), we believe that one of the best ways to assess the work and learning of the students in VE is through a portfolio or a reflection paper. Either assignment can be tailored to the specific goals of the exchange. The benefit of a portfolio is that students

need to include specific examples that impacted them, which ensures that they participate fully and reflect on that participation at the same time. The use of a portfolio also provides an opportunity for students to self-assess their learning, and for instructors to get evidence of students' intercultural competence. We recommend that practitioners include specific guidelines for the types of examples and reflection they want their students to provide. We also believe a detailed rubric would make the requirements transparent to the students and make it easier for the educators to assess the portfolios. In our example, portfolios were not graded as separate pieces of work, and we believe that this was not the most appropriate approach, as these portfolios demonstrated students' intercultural learning the best.

As for intercultural competence, it is a difficult construct to assess. The pre-exchange data showed that different students had very different levels of intercultural competence prior to the start of the exchange. Therefore, we cannot expect the same learning outcome or even the same experience for each student in the project, which means that we cannot set a goal of a certain level of intercultural competence. Practitioners may choose to look at each student's growth in intercultural competence by implementing the pre- and post-VE approach similar to the one described in this chapter. However, it may be too labor-intensive and time-consuming for a course project. In addition, we found that students' development was not linear as they demonstrated various stages and components of intercultural competence at the same time (Izmaylova, 2017). For these reasons, we return to our recommendation of a portfolio as the most appropriate assessment instrument. Using a portfolio, educators will be able to assess both the process (i.e. students' participation) and the product (i.e. students' analyses and reflections on their learning) of students' work in the VE. Combining it with a pre- and post-exchange questionnaire may also provide a more comprehensive picture of students' learning.

5. Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/35588dz4aqx7yli4njw1fwk9dojop76a>

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